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ABSTRACT

Noting the importance of pragmatic behavior, or the socially-appropriate use of language, to parents of preschool children, this study examined developmental changes in the pragmatic teaching of preschoolers and differences in parents' goals for pragmatic teaching in private versus public interactions. Participating in the study were 29 parent-child dyads (with children ranging in age between 30 and 70 months), who were videotaped for 30 minutes. Transcripts were coded for episodes of pragmatic behavior that occurred in the dyadic interaction. Findings indicated that pragmatic behaviors across the age groups largely focused on issues of what to say and how to say it. The teaching use of pragmatic behaviors in public interactions was relatively important to parents of children between 2.5 and 4 years. The proportion of spontaneous pragmatic behaviors increased dramatically between the youngest group (54 percent for 30- to 35-month-olds) and older children (at least 75 percent). The spontaneous use of pragmatic behaviors was the most common form of input (78 percent overall), followed by direct prompts (12 percent), and indirect prompts (8 percent). Pragmatic behaviors were more often prompted with direct, as opposed to indirect, comments. The direct prompts used were relatively routine and dealt with either a linguistic or behavioral social norm or a pragmatic elaboration or clarification. When pragmatic episodes focused on correcting the child's linguistic misbehavior, the prompts were indirect. (KB)

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Episodes of Pragmatic Behaviors in Parent-Child Interactions

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Abstract

Pragmatic behavior, or the socially-appropriate use of language, is important to parents of preschool children. Becker (1994) noted several questions that still remain to be answered, including issues such as developmental changes in the pragmatic teaching of preschoolers, and whether there are differences in the parents' goals for pragmatic teaching in private versus public interactions. The present study addressed these issues. Twenty-nine parent-child dyads were videotaped for 30 minutes. Transcripts were coded for episodes of pragmatic behavior that occurred in the dyadic interaction. Results indicated that pragmatic behaviors across the age groups largely focused on issues of what to say, and how to say it. The teaching and use of pragmatic behaviors in public interactions is relatively important to parents of children between 2 1/2 and 4 years. The spontaneous use of pragmatic behaviors was the most common form of input (78% overall). Pragmatic behaviors were more often prompted with direct, as opposed to indirect, comments. Additional discussion focuses on a content analysis of the direct versus indirect prompts in the different age groups.

Episodes of Pragmatic Behaviors in Parent-Child Interactions

Pragmatic behavior, or the socially-appropriate use of language in social contexts (Place and Becker, 1991), is important to parents of preschool children. The proper use of pragmatic skills is known to facilitate effective communication and social interaction (Prutting, 1982). The essential means through which people initiate and maintain social relationships is through communication, which is the foundation of social interaction (Hazen and Black, 1989). Becker (1994) noted that, although parents view pragmatics as an aspect of language that must be taught to their children, very little research has examined the means by which this teaching occurs. In one of the few studies to address this issue, Becker examined episodes of pragmatic teaching for 5 preschool children in the home context. Grief and Gleason (1980), Gleason, Perlmann, and Greif (1984), and Pellegrini, Brody, and Stoneman (1987) have found that parents' teachings largely focused on issues of what to say (e.g., "What's the magic word?"), how to say it (e.g., "Use your inside voice"), and when to say it (e.g., "Answer me when I ask you a question"). Parents' styles tended to be indirect in nature, and ranged from prompting, to modeling, to reinforcing the correct use of pragmatic behavior (Becker, 1987).

As Becker noted several questions that still remain to be answered, including issues such as developmental changes in the pragmatic teaching of preschoolers, and whether there are differences in the parents' goals for pragmatic teaching in private versus public interactions. In the present study, these issues were addressed. Children from 2-1/2 to 5-1/2 years were video taped in parent-child play sessions with one of their parents. Six age groups were created, each covering a six-month period, with the exception of the last group that covered an 11-month period. These age groups allowed for developmental comparisons. Additionally, the parents and children were video taped with an experimenter present, which created a "public" interaction situation as opposed to the "private" (in-home) interactions which served as the source of pragmatic teaching episodes in Becker's study. Thus, the present study sought to examine the following

questions: 1) What is the nature of pragmatic episodes in parent-child play interactions? 2) Are there identifiable developmental changes over the preschool age range in these pragmatic episodes?, and 3) Do pragmatic episodes in public interactions differ from pragmatic episodes in private interactions?

Method

Participants

Twenty-nine parent-child dyads participated in the study. Parents were drawn from a subject pool in the psychology department at a large mid-southern university. Parents received credit for their participation in the study. Children ranged in age from 30 to 70 months (M = 42 mos). There were 21 (72%) European-American and 8 (28%) African-American dyads. Ten (34%) of the children were females, and 24 (83%) of the parents were mothers. Parents ranged in age from 19 yrs. 7 mos. to 43 yrs. 9 mos. (M = 30 yrs. 8 mos.). The age ranges and means for each of the six age groups are noted in Tables 1 and 2.

Materials

A university classroom was used to video tape the parent-child sessions. A 4' by 6' piece of carpet and a toy box containing a variety of toys (e.g., dolls, trucks, blocks, Duplo) were placed on the floor in one corner of the room. A video camera was approximately 10 feet away from the dyad.

Procedure

Each parent-child dyad was videotaped for 30 minutes, playing with the same set of toys. Instructions to the dyads were minimal. Parents were asked to 1) play with their children on the carpet; 2) keep their children facing the camera as much as possible; and 3) play with their children as they would at home. The parents and children were told

they could play with any of the toys they wished. An experimenter remained in the room during the taping. At the end of the session the dyad was thanked for their participation.

Transcription and Coding

Each video tape was transcribed for all utterances, relevant actions, and checked for accuracy by a second trained transcriber. Pragmatic episodes were classified in terms of 1) the behavior being addressed; and 2) the form of input used. In addition, instances in which pragmatic behavior were used spontaneously in the interaction (e.g., "Can I have a blue block, please?") were also recorded. There were 15 a priori pragmatic behavior codes which were divided into four groups: 1) what to say; 2) how to say it; 3) when to say it; and 4) how to behave. There were 10 a priori codes for input that fell into three forms: 1) prompts; 2) other forms; and 3) spontaneous use of pragmatic behaviors. See Tables 1 and 2.

The final phase of the coding process was reliability. Each episode was coded independently and interrater agreement was then discussed. Reliability for pragmatic behaviors and forms of input was .85 and 1.00, respectively.

Results and Discussion

The findings are described in three sections. First, the nature of the pragmatic episodes in parent-child interactions is presented in terms of (a) frequencies of behaviors, and (b) forms of input. Second, findings related to issues of developmental changes are described. Furthermore, the differences in pragmatic teaching episodes in public and private interactions are examined.

Nature of Pragmatic Episodes in Parent-Child Play Interactions

Question 1 was to determine the nature of pragmatic episodes in parent-child play interactions. As was found in Becker's (1994) study, the pragmatic behaviors (Table 1) that occurred in this interaction context largely focused on issues of what to say, and how to say it. Table 2 shows the forms of input for the pragmatic episodes. Spontaneous use

of pragmatic behaviors was by fare the most common form of input (78% overall), followed by direct prompts (12% overall) and indirect prompts (8% overall).

Issues of Developmental Changes

In answering question 2, it is interesting to note that 75% of all pragmatic behavior episodes occurred in the youngest three age groups (A, B, and C), indicating that the teaching and use of pragmatic behaviors in public interactions is relatively important to parents of children between 2-1/2 and 4 years. (Proportions of pragmatic behaviors by age groups are presented in Table 1). Additionally, the proportion of spontaneous pragmatic behaviors increased dramatically between the youngest group (A) and the other groups. For the youngest children, 54% of the pragmatic behaviors were spontaneously generated, whereas for the other groups, at least 75% of the behaviors were spontaneous.

Public Versus Private Interactions

The third question concerned differences in pragmatic teaching episodes in public and private interactions. To examine this question, only the prompted pragmatic episodes were analyzed. When pragmatic behaviors were prompted, they were more often prompted with direct (64% overall), as opposed to indirect (36%) overall, comments. This is in marked contrast to Becker's (1994) finding, who reported that parents used indirect prompts most often.

One possible explanation for this difference may be understood in terms of "saving face" (Brown and Levinson, 1978). At play here, are both the possible face threat to the child for being "corrected" on pragmatic usage in public, and the possible face threat to the parent for having others learn that their child is not always accurate in their use of pragmatic language (much of which deals with politeness and manners). A content analysis of the prompted pragmatic episodes (see Table 3) indicated that the direct prompts used were relatively routine and dealt with either a linguistic social norm (e.g., "Say please"), a behavioral social norm (e.g., looking at the speaker while

listening), or a pragmatic elaboration or clarification (e.g., a discussion of the correct use of a common phrase). Thus, despite the fact that the pragmatic teaching occurred in a public interaction, the threat to the child's "face" for these types of prompts was relatively low. Additionally, it may have been specifically because the interaction was public that the parent was more direct. An indirect prompt may have been misunderstood by the child, leading to emphasizing an embarrassing situation. In other words, the parent's goal may have been to address the situation as quickly as possible and continue with the interaction.

In some instances, pragmatic episodes focused on correcting the child's "linguistic misbehavior" (e.g., answering back). It was in these instances that parent's tended to use indirect prompts with their children (see Table 3). It is also in these instances that the child's "face" might be most threatened. The parent's goal for using an indirect prompt may have been to save the child's "face."

In most cases, the child complied with a parent's indirect prompt that corrected a "linguistic misbehavior." Two times, however, the child did not (see Table 4). In both of these instances, the parent "backed off" by changing the topic or re-directing the child's attention. Interestingly, this is true even when the child's continuation of the pragmatic violation did not occur immediately (see example 2 in Table 4). In these instances, perhaps since the child challenged the parent in a public interaction the parent's goal changed from saving the child's "face" to saving his/her own "face."

In conclusion, the present study showed that the topics of pragmatic teaching episodes in parent-child play contexts are similar to those topics in other in-home contexts. Further, there seems to be more emphasis on pragmatic teaching during the 2-1/2 to 4-year old age range than during the 4- to 5-1/2 year range. Interestingly, the styles that parents adopted in these pragmatic episodes differed from the styles Becker (1994) reported. One reason for the difference may be due to the parents' goals that underlie their pragmatic teaching. It should be noted, though, that the present discussion

of parents' goals is speculative since this study did not explicitly examine that question. Future research should examine parents' goals for pragmatic teaching in interactions with their preschool children, and how these goals may change as the context of the interaction changes.

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Table 1. Proportion of Types of Pragmatic Behavior Episodes by Age Group

Behavior	Age Group A	B	C	D	E	F	Across Ages
What to Say							
1. Apology	.03	.22	.17	.27	.18	0	.15
2. Please	.23	.05	.13	.45	.07	.17	.18
3. Thank you	.30	.49	.50	.18	.61	.58	.44
4. Bless you	.03	0	0	0	.36	.08	.08
5. Subject Matter	.06	.05	0	0	0	.08	.02
6. Greeting/Good-bye	.03	.05	0	0	0	0	.01
How to Say It							
7. Volume	.03	.14	.04	0	0	.08	.05
8. Tone of Voice	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
9. Clarity	.01	0	0	0	0	0	.002
10. Pronunciation	.06	.03	.04	.09	0	0	.04
When to Say It							
11. Turn-taking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12. When to talk	.01	0	0	0	0	0	.002
13. Responding	.04	0	0	0	0	.08	.02
How to Behave							
14. Rule of Interacting	.08	0	.08	0	0	0	.03
Other							
15. Other	.03	0	.04	0	0	0	.01
No. of Episodes	65	37	48	11	28	12	201

Note: Age Groups: Group A 30-35 mos, Group B 36-41 mos, Group C 42-47 mos, Group D 48-53 mos, Group E 54-59 mos, Group F 60-70 mos.

Table 2. Proportion of Forms of Input by Age Group

	Age Group						
Input Form	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**Across Ages**
							Prompts
1. Direct comment on omission	.09	.05	.02	0	0	.08	.04
2. Direct comment on error	.11	.05	.08	0	0	.08	.05
3. Directive	.08	.03	0	0	.04	0	.03
4. Indirect comment on omission	.06	0	0	0	0	.08	.02
5. Indirect comment on error	.03	.08	.08	.09	.07	0	.06
Other							
6. Modeling interaction	.02	0	0	0	0	0	.003
7. Reinforcement	0	0	.02	0	0	0	.003
8. Repetition	.05	.05	0	0	0	0	.02
Spontaneous Use							
9. In interaction	.52	.62	.75	.82	.79	.67	.70
10. In play context	.02	.11	.04	.09	.11	.08	.08
No. of Episodes	65	37	48	11	28	12	201

Note: Age Groups: Group A 30-35 mos, Group B 36-41 mos, Group C 42-47 mos, Group D 48-53 mos, Group E 54-59 mos, Group F 60-70 mos.

Table 3. Prompted Pragmatic Behavior Episodes

	Indirect Comment on Omission	Indirect Comment on Error	Direct Comment on Omission	Direct Comment on Error	Directive
Linguistic Social Norm	5	0	9	1	0
Behavioral Social Norm	0	0	0	7	0
Elaboration/ Clarification	0	3	1	2	5
Volume	0	3	0	2	0
Correcting Behavior	0	6	0	3	0

Note: Categorization of errors and omissions are based on participant perception.

Definitions and Examples:

Linguistic Social Norm: linguistic routine expected in social interaction.

Indirect Comment on Omission:
M: "What do you say?"
C: "Please."

Direct Comment on Omission:
M: "Say please!"
C: "Please."

Behavioral Social Norm: an expected behavior based on rules of social interaction.

Direct Comment on Error:
M: "Look at me! Look at me!"

Elaboration/Clarification: parent requests or models an elaboration or clarification of child's utterance.

Indirect Comment on Error:
C: "A 'quare."
M: "What is it called?"

Direct Comment on Error:
C: "I'm sorry."
F: "Why are you sorry"
"You didn't do anything wrong."

Directive:
M: "Say car."
C: "Car."

Volume: speaking too loud or soft for interaction.

Indirect Comment on Error:
C: (Whispers)
M: "What?...What?
I can't hear you."

Direct Comment on Error:
C: (Whispers)
F: "You don't have to whisper."
"You can talk loud."

Correcting Behavior: child's "linguistic misbehavior" is corrected.

Indirect Comment on Error:
M: "Turn around! Turn around!"
C: "I don't wanna."
M: "'Scuse me?"

Direct Comment on Error:
C: (Squeals)
M: "Oh, cut that out!"

C= Child; F= Father; M= Mother

Table 4. Examples of Parental Face Saving

Example 1:

M: "I don't wanna build a house. You build a house."
C: "No!" (loudly)
M: "(Child's name)!"
C: "Hell no!"
M: "You want to build a house?"

Example 2:

Part A:

C: (Looks toward camera) "Get outta here!"
M: "Who are you talking to?" (Gently slaps child on wrist) "Don't talk to nobody like that."

Part B:

C: (Looks toward camera) "Get outta here girlie girl!"
M: "Stop talking to girlie girl and pay attention!"
C: "I want her to get out!"
M: "What happened to the piece here, (child's name)?"

C= Child; M= Mother